

## **Counseling: A Retention Initiative in Open University Malaysia**

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### **Abstract**

*Learner support services play a pivotal role in the retention and success of learners in any higher education institution. One particular area of such a service is academic advising and counseling. In Open University Malaysia (OUM), the Counseling Unit which operates under the Centre for Student Affairs plays a key role in encouraging learners to participate fully in their academic life and going through a holistic experience while they grow both intellectually and emotionally. One of the strategic thrusts of OUM for 2005 is learner retention. Presently, the overall learner retention rate stands at approximately 80%. Though the figure is reasonably high, OUM should strive to take proactive measures in minimizing the barriers to learner retention and increase academic interests. OUM pays particular attention to “at-risk” (with a CGPA < 2.0) learners by providing counseling services to help them cope better in their studies, until completion or graduation. The counseling unit conducts learning skills workshops for “at-risk” learners with a view of improving academic performance. The paper reports on (i) the findings of the workshop with respect to the factors that purportedly affect academic performance; (ii) the modules developed to help learners overcome their problems; and (iii) the overall effectiveness of the counseling workshops. The results show that the workshops have been beneficial to “at-risk” learners and have helped them improve their academic performance.*

### **Introduction**

It is a well-known fact that attrition rates in Open and Distance Learning institutions are higher than in the conventional on-campus institutions. Many factors contribute to attrition and among those, poor learner support services had been much the cause. The central theme of this paper is in the area of advising and counseling. There is not a single formula for success, nor a simple linear relationship between the quality of learner services and an institution's retention and completion rates. Thus it is difficult to assess the contribution of learner services in improving retention within an institution. There is limited information that directly links learner services with retention but a growing body of work is emerging. Learner services do not only cater learners with specific problems; in fact its role starts from the time a new learner steps in until they complete their study. An orientation program, for example, is vitally important to the new learners: it provides an array of information that allows learners to make informed decisions and establish realistic goals and assess their own circumstances. Good academic advising and counseling is a cornerstone to academic success. It calls for both tutor and counselor immediacy, that is prompt response to learners' needs to sustain motivation, particularly in the early part of the semester. Tutors should initiate contact because being adult learners they may not request assistance. Workshops, seminars, peer support groups can serve as a natural forum for follow-up contact right through to finishing their studies and preparing for graduation.

One of OUM's strategic thrusts for 2005 is learner retention. The retention committee which was set up to coordinate the university's retention initiatives took a proactive approach of bringing the advising and counseling to the learners. In order to qualify for graduation, learners are required to obtain a minimum CGPA of 2.0, besides completing a certain number of credits and

passing the core subjects. Learners who achieve GPA or CGPA of 2.0 and less are put in the category of “at risk”. Those who take time off from a particular semester are in the category of “defer” whilst those who drop out of the system are categorized under “quit”. Findings based on the feedback of “at-risk” learners, who are at the greatest risk of not succeeding academically, and who may add to the “defer” or “quit” statistics, are then extrapolated and used as guidelines in crafting OUM’s retention strategies.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to identify barriers to good academic performance among “at-risk” learners. Having identified the barriers, five learning skills modules were developed and used for this category of learners in workshops conducted at various OUM learning centres across the country. The assumption is that exposing “at-risk” learners to the learning skills workshops will lead to improvement in their academic performance. Effectiveness of learning skills workshops was measured by the learners’ feedback on the workshops and improvement in their CGPAs in the subsequent semester.

### **Literature Review**

Most ODL learners are mature working adults who have left education for some years, taking courses on a part-time basis. Being part-time learners they have to juggle around multiple commitments and schedules in order to cope well with their studies. Since they are also distributed throughout the learning centres across the country, they are more likely to experience isolation and alienation from the institution. At the same time, they may also be deprived of the services and staff that can be of valuable assistance to them (Bennett, Priest and Macpherson, 1999). This sense of isolation contributes to low motivation, instructional ineffectiveness, poor academic achievement, negative attitudes, overall dissatisfaction with the learning experience and high rates of attrition (Thompson, 1990). Learners’ feelings of isolation can be compounded if they are not well equipped with self-directed skill sets such as self-discipline, time management, learning independence, good planning and many others (Burak, 1993; Dunlap and Grabinger, 2003; Piskurich, 2002).

Different institutions have different setups for their learner support services, but common among most institutions is that academic advising and counseling are subsumed under the learner support services. Brindley, (1991) discussed the role of counseling in open learning by reviewing and comparing the programs at Athabasca University (AU) and the Open University. In AU, counseling is conducted centrally, through a professional counselor, whilst in OU, tutors at the learning centers play the role of counselors, which made it more decentralized. It was felt that the OU system of tutor counseling is better since learners have already built trust with their tutors.

There have been few substantive research studies exploring the relationship between the provision of counseling and learner retention. Among the earlier works is the study by Rickinson and Rutherford (1995, 1996, 1998) on the effectiveness of counseling at first year entry and final year completion. The study revealed that learners attending the counseling sessions appeared to be better equipped in managing the challenges of university life.

A large scale survey of first year learners at University of Nottingham (Szulecka et al, 1987) showed that emotional factors were more significant than academic pressures or intellectual

difficulties in predicting student attrition. The Brunel University Counseling Service Evaluation Study (Caleb, 2002), found that the increase in coping by learners rose from 10% before counseling to over 50% after counseling. Levels of motivation increased from 2% before counseling to over 50% after counseling and over 80% of respondents commented that counseling had helped them in their studies.

Other evidence of the positive correlation between counseling and retention rates came from the survey of 100 Counseling users at Middlesex University (Egert, 1999), wherein only 2% of the service users dropped out from completing the academic year compared to the overall university rate of 11.7%. A follow up study revealed that 5% of the counseling users had withdrawn compared to the overall rate of 14%.

From the available studies on the effect of counseling on retention, to a certain extent, it does show that counseling has a key role to play in improving learners' retention. As a result, many institutions are refocusing and providing additional resources to enhance academic advising and counseling activities.

## **Methodology**

### *Pilot workshop*

A pilot workshop was conducted in one of OUM's learning centres in February 2004. A total of 25 learners were invited to attend the workshop facilitated by OUM's group of counselors. These learners were "at risk" learners whose CGPA were 2.0 or below. In the sessions, these learners were asked to declare anonymously on a piece of paper what are the problems they faced that had affected their academic performance. These were submitted to the facilitators who then categorized them into appropriate categories.

### *Subjects*

Based on the pilot workshop above, several counseling workshops were organized. The participants of the workshop who represent the subjects of the study were 873 OUM learners from six learning centres who were identified as "at-risk". The purpose of the workshop was to familiarize these learners with appropriate study skills which they were lacking in. The subjects were adult learners, most of whom have full-time jobs. They were from all faculties taking a wide range of courses. The common factor the learners shared was that at the time they were called to attend the workshop, their CGPAs were 2.0 or below. In the workshop there were provided with a set of learning skills package.

### *Learning skills package*

The learning skills package comprised of five different learning modules designed to help "at-risk" learners to understand the nature, expectations and requirements of open and distance learning at OUM. The learning skills package consists of power-point slides explaining:

- a) *Self-motivation*. This module aims to make the learners aware of the energy that is within them and that they have to mobilize that energy to work for them.
- b) *How to obtain good grades at OUM*. The module guides learners to formulate strategies on how to obtain good grades by setting realistic targets for each both the coursework and examinations.

- c) *How to prepare a good term assignment.* The module provides tips on how to write good assignments.
- d) *Managing time.* The module is an exercise in scheduling their work and study priorities for a typical week in order to achieve effective use of time.
- e) *Techniques in note-taking.* The module provides tips on effective note taking to help prepare learners for examinations.

### *Instrumentation*

Two types of instruments were employed at various stages of the study. The first was an evaluation report that measures the perceived levels of effectiveness on the learning skills modules. The second was the results of the examination taken by the learners in the semester immediately after the workshop was conducted to determine the degree of success of the counseling workshop.

The six items in the Evaluation Form are:

1. The content of the module is useful to me.
2. This topic stimulates me to be more committed in my study.
3. I feel other learners should be exposed to this workshop.
4. The facilitator is effective in his presentation.
5. I am more determined to continue my studies at OUM.
6. The time allotted for this session is adequate.

The items above are to be marked on a five-point Likert Scale with 1 representing “strongly disagree” and 5 “strongly agree” with the statements.

### *Treatment versus control group*

This study used the Posttest-Only Control Group Design (Campbell and Stanley, 1963). Basically, learners with CGPA's of 2.0 or below were identified and called to attend learning skills workshops. Those who responded to the call form the treatment group while those who were called but did not attend the workshop were assigned to form the control group.

The treatment group was given the intervention of about five hours of workshop on the learning skills package. At the end of the workshop, learners were given the Evaluation Forms to record their reactions on each of the module discussed. The impact of the workshop was assumed to have direct consequences on the learners. Finally, the effectiveness of the workshop was measured according to the performance of the learners as reflected in the improvement in their CGPAs obtained in the examination following the workshop sessions.

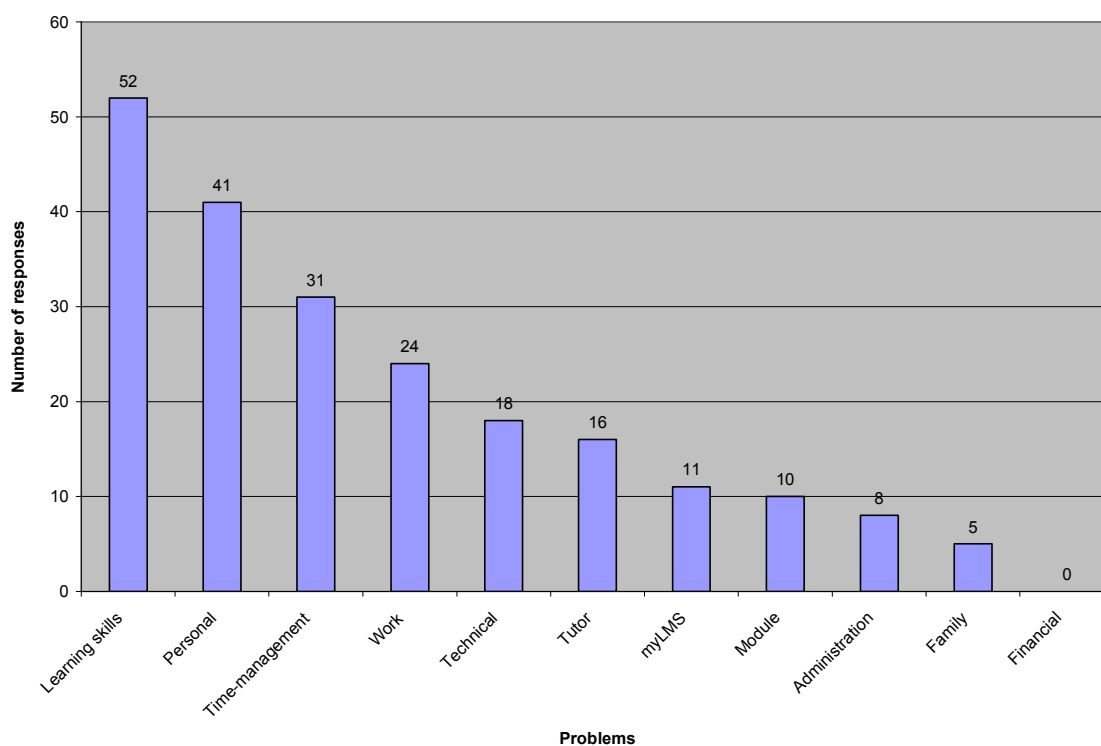
## **Results and Discussion**

The results of the study are presented in three parts: (a) a description of the problems as declared by the “at risk” learners in the pilot workshop; (b) the reactions of the learners to the Learning Skills Package Workshops; and (c) the effects of the workshops on the performance of learners in their examinations.

### 1. Problems of “at-risk” learners (pilot group)

The problems as declared by “at risk” learners in the pilot workshop were categorized into eleven areas and they are (i) personal, (ii) learning skills, (iii) work related problems, (iv) administration, (v) time management, (vi) technical, (vii) module, (viii) tutor, (ix) family, (x) myLMS, and (xi) finance. The distribution of these problems is shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Barriers to effective learning**



The top four major barriers were found to be: (i) learning skill (52), (ii) personal (41), (iii) time management (31), and (iv) work (24) in descending order of frequency of response. Examples of responses from the learners in each of the above barriers are:

#### (i) Poor learning skills

“I don’t remember what I read from the modules.”  
“I cannot understand the subject matter.”  
“I cannot write my assignments well.”  
“I cannot concentrate.”

#### (ii) Personal

“I am too old to study.”  
“I am too lazy to read the modules.”  
“I have no friend to attend tutorials with.”  
“My English is weak.”

### (iii) Poor time management

- "I have no time to study."
- "I have no time to go to the library."
- "I have too many commitments as a teacher"
- "I work in shifts."

### (iv) Problems related to work

- "I have to go outstation often and usually missed taking tests."
- "My boss gave me too many assignments."
- "Too tired to read because I have too much house and office work."

## 2. *Learners' reactions on the Learning Skills Package workshop*

The results of the learners' responses to the Learning Skills Package are given in Table 1 below:

**Table 1: Mean Scores of Learners Responses**

Statements	Number of learners	Mean Score (5-Point Likert Scale)
1. The content of the module is useful to me	161	4.4
2. I am more determined to continue my studies at OUM	161	4.5
3. I feel other learners should be exposed to this workshop	161	4.5
Average	161	4.5

On the statement, "The content of the module is useful to me," the mean score is 4.4 indicating that they are in agreement on the usefulness of the Learning Skills Package. Perhaps, after following the module, they were clearer on aspects of how to manage time, take notes and prepare for their assignments.

The mean score of 4.5 for the statement, "I am more determined to continue my studies at OUM" shows that the learning skills package has made the learners even more determined to continue their studies at OUM. With the new knowledge the learners acquired from the Learning Skills Workshop, it appears that they had a better idea on how to study at OUM and this has apparently increased their commitment.

Finally, on the statement, "I feel other learners should be exposed to this workshop", the mean score of 4.5 once again suggested that after they enrolled in the workshop, they are now very confident about studying in OUM and would like their course mates to share that feeling of confidence and commitment with them.

In summary, the learning skill package has had a very positive impact on the learners.

### 3. Effect of Learning Skills Workshops on Performance

The performance of the learners in May and September 2004 and January 2005 examinations for treatment group and that of the control group is given in Table 2.

Table 2 shows that the percentage of learners with improvements in their CGPAs was higher among the treatment group compared to that of the control group in all the three examination sessions. This indicates that the learning skills package has contributed to the better performance of “at risk” learners.

**Table 2: Improvements in Learners' CGPA**

Examination	Treatment group			Control group		
	Number of learners	Number of learners with improvement in CGPA	% of learners with improvement in CGPA	Number of learners	Number of learners with improvement in CGPA	% of learners with improvement in CGPA
May-04	62	50	80.6%	71	49	69.0%
Sep-04	138	103	74.6%	426	236	55.4%
Jan-05	127	98	77.2%	399	218	54.6%
Total	327	251	76.8%	896	503	56.1%

The results also indicate that the learners who attended the pilot workshop was able to sustain their performance as shown by the consistent increase in their CGPAs over two subsequent semester examinations. This appears to support the findings of Burak (1993), Dunlap and Grabinger (2003) and Piskurich (2002) who implied that successful ODL learners must possess self-directed skill sets such as self-discipline, time management, learning independence and good planning of the program

### Conclusion

This study identified the major sources of problems experienced by OUM learners who obtained poor CGPA at any one semester in the year 2004. The study revealed that the major barriers to good academic performance are learning skill, personal, time management and work. A study skills package was developed and used in the subsequent group counseling workshops. Feedback from participants indicated that the workshop was beneficial to them and that they were more determined to continue their studies at OUM. The respondents also felt that similar workshops be made available to other learners. The results of the examinations following the intervention indicated that percentage of learners with improvements in their CGPAs is higher among learners who attended the workshop compared to those who did not. More importantly, these improvements were sustained over two subsequent semesters. The findings showed that the impact of the counseling sessions on the learners' academic performance is positive. Thus,

OUM should continue with such intervention adding more vigor to the academic advising and counseling activities towards the goal of improving its learner retention rate.

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